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from the author

A DISCOURSE

M. Gasler

DELIVERED ON

Sabbath Bemidbar, Sivan the 2d, 5652

(May 28, 1892)

IT BEING THE

Thirty-Second Anniversary of the Consecration
of the Synagogue,

ON SEVENTH STREET ABOVE ARCH,

— BY —

S. MORAIS.

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SYNAGOGUE CHAMBERS,
K. K. MICKVÉ ISRAEL,
117 North Seventh Street.

PHILADELPHIA, June 10, 1892.

DEAR DR. MORAIS :

I listened with much interest to your sermon on the Sabbath morning of May 28th, it being the thirty-second anniversary of the dedication of our Synagogue. I feel that the perusal of that discourse must awaken thoughts promotive of Jewish interests. I would very much like that you allow me to have it published in pamphlet form for distribution among the congregation, to whose spiritual needs you minister.

Yours very truly,

DAVID H. SOLIS, Parnas K. K. MICKVÉ ISRAEL.

MR. DAVID H. SOLIS, Parnas of K. K. MICKVÉ ISRAEL.

MY DEAR SIR :

Our intercourse must have given you an idea of my disposition. I am loth to appear in print. Of course, in my capacity, I must often submit.

The discourse which you wish me to have published was meant only for those of our congregation who attended the service on the day I delivered it. You think that it may be read with some benefit by others who were absent. I yield to your wish.

Yours truly,

S. MORAIS.

Sivan, 5652.

June, 1892.

A Discourse by Dr. Morais before the Mickvé Israel Congregation.

FELLOW-CONGREGANTS:—For two consecutive weeks I had been looking forward to the occasion when I might opportunely perform a duty, not pleasurable I confess at any time, still imperative very many times—the duty of asking assistance. Those among my brethren who attended the Divine services in this synagogue last Sabbath and that which preceded it will readily understand why I kept silent when I was eager to speak. To plead for any cause, when persons who have it in their power to help, and whom the speaker may hope to influence for good, are absent, is an idle undertaking. It would, however, serve no purpose to discuss at this point the reasonableness or unreasonableness of the absence. Suffice that it existed and prevented my appealing in behalf of an object which I hold dear.

In conjunction with the Parnas of this congregation, who is also the President of the Philadelphia Branch of the Jewish Theological Seminary Association, I recently informed the readers of the *Jewish Exponent* that a spacious and in every way suitable building had been bought for the use of students, who, under the guidance of Providence, will become reliable ministers of their people's religion. To that information, intended for the Hebrew community at large, I designed to have added from this pulpit an earnest solicitation that might secure free-will gifts toward the full payment of the dwelling and the furnishing of its apartments. I meant also to request those of my fellow-congregants who are not yet connected with the organization, to make the list of its subscribers and patrons swell in size. An appeal to that

effect, even this day, would not be inopportune, but while I crave that the simple mention of my wish may elicit a favorable response, I find that to dwell now at length upon that topic would be quite out of time.

This Sabbath recalls an occurrence forcibly directing our thoughts to another channel. Thirty-two years ago, on the third day of Sivan, May 24, this comely edifice was first entered with thanksgivings and praises to Israel's God. It was then fondly anticipated by the participants in the consecration that the prediction of Haggai, concerning the erection of the second Temple, would be fulfilled in our minor sanctuary, namely: "Greater will be the glory of the latter house than that of the former, and in this place I will give you peace, says the Lord of hosts." Grateful, indeed, we ought to feel that peace did reign here. We proceeded in a uniformly even course and avoided wranglings, which not infrequently have created heart-burnings and divisions among congregations. But the prophecy touching the greater glory which we yearned after, the glory of a large accession of adherents to the principles which our synagogue represents, was not accomplished. Notwithstanding the fact that a schism, of which, thank God, I am entirely innocent—a schism brought about by personal preferences while we still worshipped in the Cherry Street Synagogue—was fortunately healed; notwithstanding that we welcomed back brothers and sisters in faith, who during a period, had assembled for prayer in another spot, still the increase of attendants to our Divine services did not grow remarkably. But how painfully must the decrease affect Israelites who still share my views!

Doubtless many familiar faces are missing, because Nature will inexorably exact her due. The old must die; unhappily, not a few were also called hence when yet in the bloom of existence. Some have likewise

moved to other cities, and many have transferred their residences to a great distance from this locality.

But it would be self-deception to ignore what has vastly militated against the religious interests of the venerable body, bearing the title of "Mickvé Israel." When I assumed its lead over forty-one years ago, not a Jewish congregation could be met in our city that would assume such an aspect as noticed very generally at present. The ritual was everywhere Hebrew, the sexes kept separate, the men remained with their heads covered, the chanting of the liturgy was performed by the Hazan, and in exceptional instances only he was aided by a male choir of co-religionists. All that has altered. I shall let others than myself judge whether the change has proved advantageous to the faith or *vice-versa*. I merely rehearse facts, not in the least induced to do so by a spirit of malevolence.

With the ministerial consent to a gradual and finally almost total abolition of the Hebrew in the services, there followed, as a logical sequence, the unwillingness of children to gain a knowledge of it, and of parents to enforce its study. The Hebrew became useless as a vehicle to congregational invocations and psalmody. There was still left the occasional memorizing of a chapter from the Pentateuch, or the learning by rote of a benediction—either practice barren of religious fruits—but in many cases not even the declaration of God's Oneness—the *Shemang*—remained for our little sons and daughters to study by heart. Can any reasonable person wonder that the religious exercises as rendered here, lost much of their value in the sight of the uninstructed, and failed to retain among us the rising generation?

Again: Women of Israel who would never have thought of complaining for having a department assigned to them in our synagogue, Jewesses who had not considered it at all disparaging to their sex to sit

where a Miss Rebecca Gratz, a Miss Louisa B. Hart, and like pious and socially noted sisters in faith sat, upon visiting places which adopted a different system, were led to deem the ancient usage preserved by us an invidious distinction—perhaps an intended affront. They would not be pointed at tauntingly by their female associates as objects of proscriptive rules when in the dwelling of prayer. They deserted it.

Again: Many years ago, when I officiated at the Cherry Street Synagogue, a member of our religious body, by no means given to cavil, lamented in my presence the necessity of staying the whole Day of Atonement in a place of worship with the ordinary man's head cover. I interposed the remark that a lighter covering would not expose him to adverse criticism, and he acted accordingly. Had my brother been living now, on seeing the very minister open the Holy Ark bareheaded, read the Law bareheaded, and thus deposit it again in the sacred shrine, he might have declined to act on my suggestion—he might have refused to enter altogether these precincts. That not a few would have approved of his resolve, the paucity of our number among youths, too obviously attests.

Again: Jews are by a law of heredity fond of music. A discordant tone grates on their ears. Nevertheless, formerly they would bear with shortcomings in that line while among us. They recognized the importance of making all participants in the Divine service, and appreciated the almost insurmountable difficulty of training and retaining long without compensation, several whose harmonious chanting would hide the deficiencies of some of the inharmonious. The idea of engaging strangers to our faith, as substitutes for a Jewish congregation, would have been very foreign to their conception of an honest worship of the Unity. But since Rabbis have sanctioned what an unbiased judgment

refuses to approve, laymen have begun to doubt their own understanding, and without taking the trouble to think, they prefer spots where attractive songs resound, even if the service be incompatible with reason.

Now, my fellow-congregants, I have set before you a plain but correct statement of the causes which have done our Mickvé Israel harm. Let me, with equal candor, with no malice aforethought, speak as education, as early associations, as a long experience, and as a sense of obligation dictate.

The Hebrew language is very dear to me. I have made it my cherished study from childhood to old age. In it my mother delighted to hear her boy chant benedictions and hymns. It has proved, moreover, a solace to my heart in many a vicissitude, and because I can truly say with the Psalmist, "Had not Thy Torah been my delight I might have perished in my affliction," therefore I am profoundly attached to it. Still, I think that I could make the sacrifice and part with what I love if I possessed the moral certainty that by so doing I would benefit Judaism in America. Nay, if I could improve the status of even this congregation alone. But would the rising generation grow more devotional, more fond of God's house, if, for its sake, I introduced an innovation causing a fatal break in that solidarity which has existed in Israel since the men of the Great Synod formulated a Hebrew ritual, constituting in the main the accepted liturgy throughout Jewdom? No; our youths would not be attracted for any length of time by a service in the vernacular. They would clamor for more—and always for more. Influenced by surroundings, which I must call pernicious, they would soon insist on the repudiation of doctrines and beliefs, of hopes and aspirations embodied in our venerated Hebrew formulary. Meanwhilè the alterations introduced would have estranged some who prefer from con-

viction, or habit—if you so choose to term it—the ancient *régime*. An irreparable schism and dire contentions would follow, and I would be left to weep during the few years that I may yet remain on earth, over the sad effect of my shortsightedness and unpardonable indiscretion.

There have been periods during my long incumbency when I strongly advocated a shorter and simpler service based on Biblical and Talmudical teachings—a Hebrew service concluded with English vocal songs, appropriate and inspiring. It was more especially before the Centennial Anniversary of American Independence that, longing for Unity in Israel of the United States, I proposed a plan for a uniform ritual. Encouraged in it, I submitted a series of articles which circulated to a considerable extent. I had been led by clerical friends to anticipate happy results—useless efforts! Since then innumerable have been the prayer-books, the issue of individual will, more or less objectionable, from a conservative point of view. Among them are reckoned some extremely faulty in diction and in sense, others forming a medley of English and German with a sprinkling of Hebrew.

Soon the disciples of a Minister, who early took the longer step toward arriving at the state of synagogal confusion, which I deprecate, will assemble to try their hands at a reconstruction. I summon the past as a witness that I malign no one when I state that from the convention now in contemplation, we may expect only a negation of what is characteristically Jewish.

But I must control painful feelings, even if confronted with the mischievous results of a tuition that has set the written and oral Law at defiance, that has heedlessly severed the links of a silvery chain which was wont to hold Hebrew families in sweet accord of religious sentiment together. I am powerless in the

face of the prevailing evil, and I shall not assume a useless censorship. I dare not, however, conceal from those under my immediate guidance the danger of being dragged in the whirlpool of "reform." Let me say it unequivocally. I can never agree to the abrogation of the Hebrew, tearing my very heart's strings, and sundering apart this religious body confided to my guardianship, in order to please the inconsiderate who look upon the culture of the Sinaic language as purposeless and burdensome, while spending years on so-called accomplishments of no real value.

Now, I have heard with unfeigned regret that brethren whose presence in this synagogue I had once more hailed with pleasure, keep again aloof because their female relatives are compelled to mount up many steps to reach their seats. I have even read of an alleged intimation to agitate the question of "family pews." In all sincerity I repeat it, I have learned that news with sorrow, particularly so since I am told that dear personal friends of mine are among the females who complain. Would I not gladly favor sisters in faith, whose presence increases the size of the congregation on Sabbath and Holiday mornings remarkably? Most assuredly I would. But were I to ignore a rule that has been in force at least from the building of the second Temple to this day wherever our people meet in prayer, except during the last four or five decades in some American houses of worship; were I, in my wish to oblige sisters to whom the Jewish method, which we still respect, brings fatigue, inclined to deviate from that almost universal rule in Israel, I still could not recognize a cogent reason for trespassing. For what is set forth as the impelling motive for encroaching upon the ancestral custom? The desirableness of sitting here, husbands and their wives, brothers and their sisters, parents and their children together, as in their

private domiciles. But when would that desire be accomplished? Not every Sabbath, nor every Festival, possibly once or twice through the whole year. Where the plausible reason for a change falls to the ground, to attempt it is in my mind an inexcusable act. I can see no objection for a mother holding beside her in the gallery her little boy, or the father below his small girl, but anomalous would appear to me the presence in this auditorium of single or married Jewesses, unaccompanied by their adult male relatives. Perhaps I labor under strong impressions early received, and am influenced by Rabbinical instruction. Such, at all events, is my manner of thinking, hence my decided reluctance to do violence to my convictions—altering what my superiors have enacted.

Respecting the question of remaining bareheaded in synagogue, a question which has assumed undue proportions, as if the life or death of Judaism hinged upon it, I confess that I look on our yielding to the habits of Gentilism as cowardice—pardon the expression. For what has urged the occupants of Jewish pulpits to insist upon male attendants at the synagogue removing their hats? What, but in most cases the fear that Christians may style Jews ill-bred, unrefined, perchance, impolite toward the ladies? How very strenuous the personal and literary endeavors of American Rabbis in that direction! I have read essays and pamphlets aiming to prove that Jews ought to remain bareheaded when praying. For some leaders of the “reform” wing in our ranks are learned and they can cleverly quote Talmudists and casuistical writers—whom, however, they ordinarily cast aside—when those authorities can inferentially be construed as favoring certain innovations. Thus it has happened that despite the mention of *Miznefeth*, *Zanif* and *Migba'ah* as head coverings used by priests and laymen, despite the circumstance that no less a philoso-

pher than Maimonides commends in his "Moreh" the olden usage, our modern leaders would have us believe that what the Michvé Israel Congregation adheres to lacks foundation, and ought to be abolished. But I would never consent, while I do admit that questions of infinitely greater importance ought to occupy our minds.

Yes; we should ponder, so as to devise means how to hinder further inroads into sacred ground. Why are certain places of Jewish worship, that have made all manner of concessions, weakening as to their numerical strength; why do the spiritual guardians thereof bewail the loss of attendants on the morning of the Lord's Sabbath? Have they not elaborate songs and professional singers? Have they not invited female congregants below? Have they not permitted male congregants to follow their own option regarding a cover on their heads? Have they not interlarded Hebrew invocations with English and German hymns? Have they not advocated the shortest service and the most attractive representations to please the eye and charm the ear? That I, uncompromisingly attached to a service for the people, by the people, performed in great simplicity and inexpensively, should behold the thinning of our files, can be easily explained in these days of high-wrought services and sumptuous temples, but that others who moved with the current, not to bear the reproach of being behind the age, should lament, would seem passing strange.

But vain have proved their efforts! They have gone far, but not far enough. They cannot cope with colleagues who have thrown down the gauntlet and defied all tenets and ordinances, all rules and customs; who have turned their backs upon "chosen Israel," so as to call over a large following from the opposite side. That accession of number, foreign to the Sinaic covenant,

may belong to "Unitarianism." It is welcome. No pledge of obedience to the Abrahamic rite, to dietary prescriptions, to Sabbath, to Festivals or Fasts will be demanded. Adherence to "a Judaism pure and simple," with Biblical and traditional Judaism studiously left out, is the requirement. It mainly consists in visiting on a leisure day, at a leisure hour, spots where eloquence enraptures and music enravishes.

My hearers: Not once, but often I have openly, unreservedly expressed in your presence my deepest conviction respecting assemblages of the character which I have just delineated. The men and women who constitute such are my fellow-creatures, whom I will gladly join under any circumstance in whatever helps humanity. They are my neighbors, whom my religion commands that I shall always love as myself and heartily serve to allay personal ills, and farther personal interests, but as "Jewish congregations" I am forbid to recognize them.

In my mind there can be but one alternative; we must either hold on to ancestral Judaism at the cost of the sacrifice of means, of time and bodily enjoyments, or avow our abjuration. We cannot deceive God. We cannot subscribe ourselves the disciples of Moses, the Prophets and the Sages while deliberately trampling under foot all their behests.

One thought more before we part this morning. When Joshua had grown old, expecting soon to leave the people he had fought for and guided, he convened together the representatives of the tribes and inquired whether, being in possession of a land which they could call their own, and of all which contributes to make life pleasurable, they would keep loyal to their protective Lord. The answer was affirmative. The conscientious chief did not rest satisfied with the promise. He gave a solemn warning. He pictured the difficulty of carry-

ing it out in the presence of numerous enticements. He defined the moral courage needed to stand by the Torah with its vigorous demands and pointed out the effects of perjury and infidelity. . . . The thirty-two years I have officiated in this sanctuary, besides the nine and upward in the preceding one, have shown changes that have terribly shaken my faith in the consistency of my Philadelphia co-religionists. I have witnessed startling events, which, when I entered into the service of my Master, I would have imagined impossible—a perfect transformation in the mode of thinking and acting of families and individuals, for whose staunch adherence to the statutes I might have pledged my word of honor. . . . May I not live to see still worse. At all events, neither by precept nor by example, will I ever lead my flock astray. By the help of my Maker, I will, despite age and ailments, try to work on in order to confirm the strong in the Jewish belief and strengthen the weak. I will, to the last, foster the cultivation of a knowledge which I deem of paramount importance for the maintenance of the bond which ought to fasten Israel together through the length and breadth of the habitable globe.

Joy will it be to me always to feel that this “Hope of Israel” is not lost, that the expectations which it aroused in its founders, in many who saw the consecration of our holy house, and in the sainted ones who have endowed it with the tokens of their affection, will be revived.

May the young rejuvenate us, so that in the language of Hosea, forming the closing declaration of our Haftarah, a newer era of God’s espousal with us may speedily dawn. “I will betroth thee forever; I will betroth thee rightfully and justly in loving kindness and benevolence. I will betroth thee with faithfulness, and thou shalt know the protecting Lord.”



